

THE MANY SIDES OF GERTRUDE STEIN'S *TENDER BUTTONS*

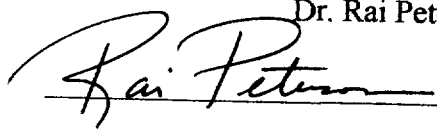
An Honors Thesis (Honors 499)

by

Jori M. Swan

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Rai Peterson

 12/08/98

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

October 1998

Graduation: December 1998

Sp 131
T 1900
L 5
222
124
1228
1293

PURPOSE OF MY THESIS

This research paper on Gertrude Stein's text, Tender Buttons, served as a means of discussion about the different categories in which it has been placed by critics and readers. It is an insight into the life and creativity of Gertrude Stein. Even more, it allows insight into the ideas of critics and readers and how classification of such a work is formed. Five main categories are discussed, in which evidence from readers is given for and/ or against that category. There is also a chapter on my personal reading of Tender Buttons and why I have been inspired by both Gertrude Stein and this text in particular. There are specific examples from the text and also examples of my own attempts to make sense out of this text. This paper was a journey through systems of research, criticism, and self-understanding.

Introduction

The biggest problem with literary criticism is that everyone is trying to find some new meaning in a work. Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* lends itself to this type of literary criticism. While reading about *Tender Buttons* I came across this conversation, which repeatedly took place between Gertrude Stein and a young visitor, Fritz Peters; "Another time she found me looking at one of her books and asked me what I thought of it. 'It doesn't make sense.' 'You've more courage and intelligence than most people,' she said. 'No, it doesn't make sense. That's the point'" (Souhami 161). Well, if Gertrude Stein herself said that it doesn't make sense then why do so many critics, students, and readers try to find something in (analyze) *Tender Buttons*? The best answers I have to this question are that they either interpret 'it doesn't make sense' in different ways, they are trying to find a way of justifying her 'point', or they just plain don't believe her. *Tender Buttons* veers far from the classical definitions and examples of any form of literary writing. It begins to resemble the cubist movement. "For some people, the very fact that she deliberately violates the classical tradition of clarity may be enough to dismiss her" (Yalden-Thomson 137).

It is not enough to dismiss me. This classical defiance in literature makes me want to get inside Gertrude Stein's head and follow her every thought process while she was creating *Tender Buttons*. Since I obviously could not do this, the next best thing was to explore what other people think about *Tender Buttons* and Gertrude Stein. Some people believe that it is a form of literary cubism and has coded messages that must be uncovered. There are some people who believe that Gertrude Stein was creating a feminine or homosexual language. Then there is the basic theory that each individual gets his or her own meaning and enjoyment from it. The theory which I think holds the most influence is that Gertrude Stein wrote *Tender Buttons* for herself and about herself.

It is a book that should be read and enjoyed and anything else that the reader, personally, gets out of it is an added bonus to a good book in its own right.

(1)
Is There No Sense In *Tender Buttons*?

ORANGE
*A type oh oh new new not no not knealer knealer of old show
beefsteak, neither neither (TB 38).*

When I first read *Tender Buttons* I spent hours trying to figure out what this poem in particular could mean to me. I just couldn't understand why or how she chose these words to put together. In my thought process, words were only used for one purpose...to create meaning. If I couldn't find some meaning in this poem then the words are just words and there is no sense involved. One critic, Francis Russell, put things bluntly when he stated, "The elementary fact to understand about Gertrude Stein is that she is incomprehensible because there is nothing there to comprehend" (Hadas 58).

The readers who accept the proposal that there is no sense in *Tender Buttons* would probably say that Gertrude Stein wasn't much of a writer at all and that this work in particular was simply words thrown down on paper without an idea to bring these words together. These critics would look at a poem like 'Orange' and attempt to find any minute correlation between what they know the words to define. What would "beefsteak" have to do with an orange? What is she talking about when she says, "knealer"? What is the significance of repeating words? I think I can safely say that I could not answer any of these questions with a straightforward or clear response. Based on this type of analysis, I would say that there is no sense in *Tender Buttons*.

There is a semi-tight following that justify the belief that there is no sense in this work based on the theory that it is all a hoax. "Miss Stein's followers believe she has added a new dimension to literature (T.B.); scoffers call her writings a mad jumble of words, and some of them suspect that she is having a sardonic joke at the expense of those who profess to believe in her" (White 112). This theory is not at all inconceivable, and, in reality, it has probably occurred before in literature. For example, in Chaucer's

Canterbury Tales or Carroll's *Jabberwocky*. The two questions that need to be answered to support or refute such a claim are, based on the evidence in Gertrude Stein's life, would this (a hoax) be something she would attempt to do? Also, if it is a hoax, does that justify the idea that it doesn't have any meaning? I don't see a substantial reason why she would want to write a hoax. On the contrary, I think that her close ties to the cubist painters and modernist thinkers of the time reveal a "different" thought process-but not a hoax. If it was all a hoax that doesn't mean that meaning isn't involved. There have been many great scams in which sense is a key component. However, if she simply pulled words out of nowhere and placed them together and not even she thought about the new word combinations and their new meanings, then they would not have received a proper "birth" into language.

There are other reasons why people say there is no sense in *Tender Buttons*. Maybe these people just don't want to work to find sense. "It is so easy for sense to fade, despite Stein's insistence that she couldn't make words write without it" (Hadas 63). The simple truth to this matter is that just because we cannot grasp and hold onto the meaning or sense, does not mean that it is not there. There is a difference between something not being present and a reader not being able to find it. There are at least two interpretations in any text, the writers' and the readers'. My mind may not be able to put together the words the author has chosen in a way that will make sense to me. Just because it doesn't make sense to me doesn't mean that there *isn't* an intended meaning.

This brings up the question of words and what words represent. In the classical tradition of both literature and language, there is a symbol, a word, that goes with an actual being, entity, or idea. The word carries a certain, specific meaning. So what happens when that meaning is changed? When the word and the image developed when a word is uttered are separated, then what is a word? F.W. Dupee, a critic, agrees that words are carriers and can be molded. "And words, like the other materials of the literary medium, become useful to the artist, assume a character purely aesthetic, in proportion as

they can be converted from bearers of established meaning and unconscious association into plastic entities"(Dupee 521). If this theory is true then there is no sense involved for the reader. The words have been stripped of their meaning, and we cannot find the sense we are looking for. Once again, however, it is possible for the words to carry new meanings. It is also possible that the meanings of the words aren't involved at all and the sense created comes from the aesthetic, the sound or the juxtaposition of the words make sense.

All of the senses play an important role in creating meaning. What might be happening in these poems is that too many of the senses are being stimulated in different ways and therefore meaning is altered or blurred. "*Tender Buttons* is neither a conscious effort nor a struggle, nor is there any correlation between sight, sense, and sound" (Russell 87). In the absence of a correlation between these senses there also lies a possible meaning. The meaning that is created in the absence of some customary function may be hard for us to see. For example, if I were to create a painting and the sense of the painting was to be represented in the absence of a normality, then it might be hard for a viewer to make sense of it in the same way that I could as the painter. It is possible that some people don't find sense in *Tender Buttons* because there is no medium for sense to be carried on. Without a medium, it is hard to even communicate without adding the pressures of symbols and meanings.

The mode which meanings travel on is also important to consider. Does "...oh oh not no not knealer knealer..." not make sense because the words do not form a known connection and the grammar usage is different than normal? If this is the basis for the argument that there is no sense in *Tender Buttons*, then I think we have forgotten that sense can be found and communicated in other forms and techniques than the forms taught in school. "By removing meaning (in words) we attend to sound, and Gertrude Stein is free to create melodies never before possible in English literature because she is liberated from word combinations that most resemble our 'everyday musics'" (Weinstein

65). If we could agree that sense is removed because meaning from word juxtaposition is removed then couldn't we also agree that we could make sense out of the sound of the words together?

Whether we are considering meaning in words themselves or in the sound of words, there are always conventions which we look for that trigger something in us to make us connect with the poem in some way. Gertrude Stein has removed the majority of the conventions and created new. Randa Dubnick states that, "*Tender Buttons* did attain 'a certain notoriety' in the press and attract polemical criticism, perhaps because it does seem to 'veer off into meaninglessness', at least in conventional terms" (Dubnick 28). Critics at the time claimed that they couldn't find any meaning or sense in Gertrude Stein's work. I don't think that they couldn't find sense, but rather that they didn't look for it to make sense. For example, if I look at a group of football players and I assume that they are all men, then it would be hard for me to realize that one of the players was a girl. When people expect things and ideas to fall into their laps, it is hard for them to become an active participant in reading. Active participation could help people realize that she is not writing about or for classical terms and the sooner they can realize this, the sooner they can search to find out whether or not sense is actually a part of her writing, on her terms of course.

The structure and form of the poem are important to its meaning. Gertrude Stein tried at every point she could to eliminate grammar rules and syntactical formulas. When Stein changes the format words are functioning in, then she is also changing the meaning of the words. If Stein puts an adjective in at the point in the sentence where there is "supposed" to be a noun, then what is she saying to the reader about the meaning of the poem? One critic, Hawkins, believes that "What Stein attempts in *Tender Buttons* is a revision of syntax, its power to order and hierarchise, and a dismantling of the place of the subject" (Neuman 120). If we look at it from this point of view, is Stein eliminating meaning or creating meaning? What does a subject represent? A subject is a person,

place, or thing. Perhaps Stein is trying to show, through the placement of the words and the words themselves, how people, places and things are being moved around in her life. We could even take that a step further and say that it is how the "subjects" of the twentieth century are being moved around. People who don't know or understand the conventions and formulas of language wouldn't find sense in an attempt like this.

The saying, "don't judge a book by its cover" should apply to this book because there are people who start off with just the title and already assume that the book doesn't make sense because the title doesn't make sense. "Our everyday assumptions tell us that the phrase 'tender buttons' is nonsense"(Walker 127). If we look at the literal definitions of buttons then it would be unlikely that we would use an adjective like "tender" to describe them. If we look at buttons as a representation of something else, then it would be possible to use such an adjective to describe it. Gertude Stein had a collection of buttons which she cherished. Perhaps the word tender is describing Gertude Steins' own collection. Wouldn't she be tender toward them? We are not being fair in judging the meaning of the title before we find meaning in the text. If we do not find meaning in the text that supports the title, then it would be justifiable to say that the title also doesn't make sense.

Overall, the justifications for the claims that there is no sense in *Tender Buttons* are not solid. The biggest conflict and question involved in finding sense is the definition of what 'sense' is. While reading *Tender Buttons*, one must realize that if she goes through the whole book and arrives at the end without thinking about it, that does not signify that there is no meaning. The lack of a coherent, logical, conventional style may not allow for the reader to think on a conscious, logical level. However, "...the absence of logic and consequential thought does not signify an absence in meaning " (Hadas 58). If we as readers do not already have some way to file the information in the poems and the way the information is given then we must first create a filing system before we can think about the material and arrive at a certain amount of meaning. The best way I know how

to create this new filing system would be to open up the mind and erase all pre-conceived notions. When the new information is read, new systems would be created.

NOTHING ELEGANT

*A Charm a single charm is doubtful. If the red is rose and there is
agate surrounding it, if inside is let in and there places change then
certainly something is upright. It is earnest.*

If I said that this poem was really a philosophical statement about the class system and morals, would you think I was crazy? Some teachers and students told me that the poems in *Tender Buttons* were coded messages and that I would have to figure out what they really mean. Thinking in a logical, educated way I looked up every word in the dictionary. I also looked the words of this poem up in a thesaurus to find out other similar words. On my paper I had definitions and words and I came up with this; Gertrude Stein was saying that high class society doesn't really have class or charm. High society may have jewels and red roses but these things are secluded from the rest of the world, therefore excluding the high society. Finally, earnestness and honesty are found in upright people from any class. This is the coded message I found in this particular poem.

An important question that I have is, did Gertrude Stein intend to encode messages and if she did, is mine correct, and how do I know? Some readers would say that *Tender Buttons* is full of coded messages but that we may never know if we decode them correctly because they are about private matters to Stein. One critic, Pamela Hadas, says, "It is a labyrinth of privately colored and coded musings on the subjects of separation and replacement, the objects of anger and love" (Hadas 70). This statement leads me to believe that the 'coded' parts could be figured out if we could find out about Gertrude Stein's personal life. It also hints about broad topics that may be involved in the coded messages. Stein was experiencing many emotions at the time in her life when she wrote

Tender Buttons. One of the main aspects of her life at this time was the disassociation with her brother Leo and the replacement of him by her new lover, Alice B. Toklas.

When we say that Stein is writing in coded messages we mean that she is feeling or experiencing emotions and things which, consciously or unconsciously, she has transformed into objects, food, and rooms. Other people have different terms for the same idea. A writer from San Diego State, James Rother, chose to describe it as "translation." "Translation is probably the most appropriate term one could use to describe this sort of writing" (Rother 115). When we use a word like "translation" then we could expand the idea of coded messages to include Stein translating her experiences from the actual experience to the broader, more worldly ideas of similar experiences. In this sense, readers today would also have to translate Stein's words and experiences into modern equals.

Stein also uses unknown conventions to create meaning. The simple fact that she creates new images and styles of writing sends a message. Mabel Dodge, a friend of Gertrude Stein, relates the idea of Gertrude Stein "creating meanings." "In her impressionistic writing she uses familiar words to create perceptions, conditions, and states of being, never before quite consciously experienced. She does this by using words that appeal to her as having the meaning that they *seem* to have" (Hoffman 28). This can be taken to mean that Stein took words with known meanings and implied new meaning or that she took words with known meanings and put them together, which created new meanings. Either way we look at it, the reader who believes there are encoded messages, has to decipher these meanings before he can do anything else to find more meaning.

Some readers will say that Stein is writing in coded messages, but that the messages are spelled out. The only thing the reader has to do is put the pieces together and there's no real decoding involved. Margaret Dickie, a woman's studies specialist, touches on this idea. "And so the radical experimentation of *Tender Buttons*, often theorized within the known parameters of modernist experimentation with

nonreferentiality and the abandons representation, but rather one that seeks to represent something that Stein does not come to name directly" (Dickie 24). The 'thing' that is represented could conceivably be known to all of us. The fact is that we might not have known it the way Stein did, so she showed us her way, and we had to figure that out.

While reading about *Tender Buttons* I ran across many writers who said that Stein was hard to read because of the language she used. They think that it is because of this language that the messages are hard to decode. Norman Weinstein said, "There are no words in *Tender Buttons* that could not be understood by an elementary school graduate. But their structuring requires the greatest perceptual acumen to unravel" (Weinstein 49). It isn't the words or language that make it difficult to find the hidden messages. What does make it difficult is the juxtaposition of words and the changing of grammar. If there are actually encoded messages then they lie within these new structures. The very fact that she would use a noun in the place "reserved" for a verb could contain some hidden meaning.

An important aspect in finding a message is the median that the reader chooses to follow when searching for the meaning. Some readers could look for coded messages about animals, some about politics, others about time. Pamela Hadas searches for this hidden meaning through the idea of order. "The question as it interested Gertrude is not simply how to introduce order into chaos, however, but whether you can have both order and chaos, introduce order without ordinary sense and meaning, invent an extraordinary order" (Hadas 65). This extraordinary order is the hidden meaning for Hadas and not only did she arrive at it through the actual words, but also the structure and format of the text. Stein took an orderly grammar, used common words, rearranged the two, created a chaotic format, and then combined a little old and a little new. This seems to describe Hadas' hidden meaning and it is found in the style and not the writing itself.

The search for specific meaning also includes the search for what the title means. Margueritte Murphy says that "a detached button signifies discord between lovers..."

(Murphy 400). I have come across about twenty different meanings of the title. The symbolism involved is not common knowledge to just everyone. Also, the writer would have to know about Stein's life and relationships. It is interesting how much time people spend writing back and forth and arguing about the hidden meanings of this book. Even more interesting is that almost everyone I read mentioned the meaning of the title. People who believe that *Tender Buttons* is written in coded messages would opt for a translation like the one above that incorporates knowledge taken from different areas and meaning found in the new juxtapositions created.

One way that readers would go about decoding *Tender Buttons* is to know what exactly is in it. What I mean is what is 'Nothing Elegant'? Is it a person, a feeling, a description, a tone, a song, an occurrence, an action? We cannot say for sure and maybe Stein herself didn't know. Every reader must decide how he or she is going to interpret what is in the work before he or she can interpret its message. "It is certainly easier to think of the items in *Tender Buttons* as 'occurrences' rather than 'descriptions'"

(Mizejewski 41). It is because of these kind of options given the reader, that *Tender Buttons* could be considered prose rather than poetry. This is important because 'Nothing Elegant' probably isn't two things. It probably isn't a person and an occurrence. On the other hand, some critics say that it could be all-encompassing and that is where the hidden meaning lies, that not even Stein herself knows all of the hidden meanings. Is it poetry when the author of the poem doesn't know the meaning?

The forms that Stein uses to convey messages lend themselves to the idea that there are coded messages. For instance, when she says buttons, does she really mean nipples? If she does then have I decoded her puzzle? One critic, Cynthia Secor, states that "the artifacts of domesticity, the parts of the female body, interpersonal relations, food, nursery rhymes, characters out of life and fiction, all are present, not as metaphors, symbols, or stereotypes, but as systems of meaning..."(Fleischmann 304). These systems of meaning could be considered 'hidden'. If the readers look at these specific areas as the

meanings in the poems, all they have to do is figure out how Stein uses words and structures to convey these ideas. Along with this idea come the ideas of positives and negatives. One critic states that, "In *Tender Buttons* she teases us by not identifying an object, by saying not what it is, but what it is not" (Rieke 67). The rule of process of elimination takes place. Therefore, in one sense, she does tell us the meaning, it's not hidden, it's just what isn't there.

One final option to consider, if you are a reader trying to find coded messages, is that to fully decode *Tender Buttons*, you must also read and understand everything else Stein has written. Perhaps the clue to decoding is in and among her many works rather than isolated in one work. Allegra Stewart, an avid Stein reader, has written about this same idea. "The isolation of an object by the human mind was carried much farther by Gertrude Stein than it has been carried by other writers. Many of her (works), taken in isolation, seem fragmentary and unintelligible. The whole of her work, however, has unity and meaning" (Stewart 505). This idea makes perfect sense because a writer doesn't lose her opinions and ideas from one work to another. These ideas may change, but they are not lost. To get the complete picture, to find the coded messages, a reader would have to read the complete works of Gertrude Stein and possibly even more.

On a new subject, some readers and critics claim that Stein is writing in a form of literary cubism. Francis Russell said that Gertrude Stein "explained *Tender Buttons* as cubism applied to writing" (Russell 84). This technique is known as literary cubism, and it is widely applied to her text. Stein was good friends with many of the famous cubist painters, including Picasso. She had paintings covering a sitting room in her house where she held weekly salons. F.W. Dupee said that "she sought to find literary equivalents for the various experiments conducted by the cubists" (Dupee 521). Stein also did small works called Portraits. Each portrait was about one individual, usually people she knew fairly well. The style of these portraits was the same as *Tender Buttons*. The novel

Tender Buttons and also the many Portraits she did were an attempt at her literary cubism.

The cubists had messages in their paintings that viewers tried to discover. Randa Dubnick compares Stein to the cubist painters. "Like the cubists, Stein abandons conventional description of the object, though she is still concerned with the object as her 'model'" (Dubnick 33). Stein took an object, like a box, and described it in words that have never been used to describe a box before. The image that forms in the reader's head is new and perhaps not even like a box anymore. One critic, B.L. Reid, says, "The kinship of this technique to cubism in painting is very clear and very interesting, and as literature it is by no means entirely opaque" (Reid 117). Whether Stein actually used literary cubism in *Tender Buttons* is not definite but the ideas are similar. "Stein's arrangement of odd groups of objects forces us to look for special relationships among them" (Rieke 79). It is this need to figure out why she used the relationships she did that causes us to search for coded messages whether it is a form of literary cubism or just hidden ideas.

Can Each Reader of *Tender Buttons* Find Individual Meaning?(Excerpt From) *Rooms*

A success, a success is alright when there are there rooms and no vacancies, a success is alright when there is a package, success is alright anyway and any curtain is wholesale. A curtain diminishes and an ample space shows varnish(TB 48).

Gertrude Stein would define a success as something that wouldn't "diminish." A success is something that can bring pleasure over and over and not be bought "wholesale." If this is true then it is fair to say that *Tender Buttons* can bring various meanings to different individuals. Pamela Hadas observes that, "most readers, at first, do not know what to make of *Tender Buttons* at all - a joke perhaps" (Hadas 58). The important words here are "at first." Each individual has to find meaning for him or herself. If the reader doesn't care enough for language to work through and discover his own meaning, then Gertrude Stein wouldn't want him to read it. The aforementioned excerpt from *Rooms* is a good example of interpretation. At first, I thought that Gertrude Stein was writing about old, cheap curtains, and that there wasn't any meaning involved. Later, I found the passage to be telling me that ideas did not have to be the same for everyone. Hadas also points out that ideas change while reading *Tender Buttons*. "Each will eventually come to her own difference, a difference that points to identities, a difference that is as difficult to make as a conclusion" (Hadas 72). In attempting to change the language and form we use to understand words, Stein did not set out to create a new collective, wholesale way, but rather many individual ones.

Each individual reader gets her own meaning from Stein, but that doesn't mean that more than one reader can't get similar meanings. One critic, Margueritte Murphy, acknowledges the fact that not even critics can interpret Stein in just one way, even though there are several main schools of ideas joined by different critics. "On the whole, interpretive criticism of *Tender Buttons* has tended to be cumulative, each reader

discerning new possible codes or stories behind these very open, indeterminate texts, without such readings being mutually exclusive" (Murphy 384). The critic or reader who either tries too hard to find exactly what someone else has, or tries too hard not to find anything at all, isn't giving *Tender Buttons* a fair shot. Every reader should read this novel for the enjoyment it offers. I believe, from reading some of Stein's other works, that Gertrude Stein got enjoyment out of writing it, so maybe the readers should simply get enjoyment out of reading it.

Have you ever experienced or seen something that had a major effect on you and when you try to explain the effect it had on you to someone else, they don't find themselves being similarly affected? This is similar to what Stein did with *Tender Buttons*. She was affected by a room, and she wrote down intimate details about why it affected her and how. When we read what she had to say about that room, we may not get anywhere near the same impression because we weren't experiencing the exact same thing as she did. Robert Rogers, a critic of Stein's, wrote that "instead of trying to convey her impressions of facts through words selected very subtly for their meaning, she gives the exact arrangements and sounds of words which have affected her, in hope the reader, or listener, will get the same impression" (Hoffman 33). By using such specific sounds and visuals Stein is trying to recreate the experience as she had it. Even if it isn't the same, the overall emotions could be similar.

Even a specific experience is not a constant thing. The memory of an experience changes over time and also the time period when a specific event happened changes the significance of the event. If I assume that I know what Stein was trying to do, or if I feel I have had something affect me the same way she has in one of her poems, will my feelings and assumptions change over time? It is safe to say yes. Allegra Stewart, a believer in Stein's creativity, acknowledges that "like space, knowledge is infinite, but actual knowing is an individuated process within a finite world where all things change" (Stewart 494). Gertrude Stein wrote *Tender Buttons* based on infinite combinations of

words and sounds. She wrote through her knowledge and chose the sounds and combinations that worked for her at the time. Not even ten years later, in an interview, Stein said that not all of the poems in *Tender Buttons* are how she wanted them to be (Haas 13). What Gertrude Stein learned from and knew about *Tender Buttons* is not and never can be the same things I know and can learn from it. Even if Gertrude Stein herself could sit down and explain the exact meaning she had in mind for the poems, I wouldn't feel exactly the same way as she would about them.

Readers don't have to find individual meaning in *Tender Buttons*. After all, Stein said that meaning wasn't the point, but the individual reader can still come away with an individual enjoyment or even hatred just from reading it. Donald Sutherland, who compiled a Stein biography, spoke of the pleasure found in Stein. "Gertrude Stein can be and is often read for the sheer pleasure of the style so far as it is conveyed by the sound and look of the words" (Sutherland 83). When I was younger I used to stare at sentences. I would take the words in the sentence and push them together and see what new words could be formed. I would also try to sound out the syllables of the whole sentence pushed together. I had fun doing things like that. The idea that someone picked something that walked around on four paws and meowed and decided to call it a cat is interesting. Gertrude Stein was trying to get each reader to look at her writing and get some pleasure out of it from the words and sounds and the way she put them together.

Tender Buttons is a work that can be read aloud so that the listener and the reader of the text play a more active role. They become more active interpreters of emotion. "As several critics have pointed out, the text is meant to be read aloud and its sense of humor cannot be ignored in the most serious readings" (Mizejewski 34). Some critics and readers believe that Gertrude Stein wanted to provide a source of enjoyment. There are certain paintings that cannot be explained, but yet Stein and others enjoyed them for what they are. Stein is attempting to ask each reader or listener to enjoy the sound of the language in the order she put it together. Allegra Stewart wrote that "in contrast to the

written word, the spoken word is meditated both by the voice and by the physical presence of the speaker" (Stewart 495). If the speaker is an advocate of Stein's, the poetry will probably be more fun and free flowing. If the speaker does not like Stein, that would come across in his interpretation, and it might be choppy and boring. The written word carries itself; it contains its own meaning and it is difficult for it to carry specific emotions from the writer. A speaker can add certain emotions and enhance the words. Not only are the emotions important in reading Stein aloud, but so are the combinations of sounds. Stein wanted the words to flow together, in some case, like I used to do with my sentences. One of Stein's most influential friends, Carl Van Vechten agrees that *Tender Buttons* should be read aloud, "and *Tender Buttons* benefits by reading aloud. Onomatopoeia, sound echoing sense, is a favorite figure of speech with Miss Stein; so is alliteration which is fatally fascinating when mingled with reiteration..." (qtd. in Hoffman 37). When her poetry is read aloud, individuals can find a certain amount of enjoyment or even agitation in simply the sounds conveyed, almost like music.

Tender Buttons is meant to be read for the enjoyment it brings to the readers. When readers spend a great deal of time trying to force meaning out of it, they are missing the point and unfortunately, the experience. Randa Dubnick, a reader from The University of Illinois, says that "Gertrude Stein has been greatly overread..." (Dubnick 41). She does not mean that too many people have been reading Stein's works. She means readers are trying to read *Tender Buttons* with so much intent upon finding meaning, they miss the pleasure, which was Stein's purpose. Gertrude Stein did not attempt to prove anything, nor did she attempt to convey a message. Gertrude Stein said "It is not clarity that is important but force. Clarity is of no importance..." (qtd. in Yalden-Thomson 134). The forcefulness of the words that Stein put together and how that force affects the reader were the most important aspects of Stein's writings. Stein used techniques, but she left them open for interpretation. The impact of the words and the juxtaposition of the words are more important than the meanings the individual words convey.

Gertrude Stein published *Tender Buttons* in 1914. The experiences and feelings she has included for herself in this book of poetry occurred before this time. It is society who determines that certain words are not to be said by ladies and that some words are identifiable marks of a lower class. It is also society who defines the words we use. Since society plays such an important role in the 'making' of words, it would only make sense that they play a part in the receiving of words also. Nancy Miller, a writer, says that "Words get their 'color intensity' by the emotion and circumstance of their social usage" (Miller 14). The 'color intensity' given to a word in 1914 could be different than what society would prescribe for it today. Beyond that, the society that was reading Stein's works in 1914 has expanded to a greater number and a greater variety of classes. For these reasons, Stein's works must be individually interpreted and enjoyed. In order for this to occur, the readers must have open minds. When I read *Tender Buttons*, I have to remember that she was writing about the human emotions and circumstances, and if she were writing about these topics in 1998, the ideas she would be trying to get across would be similar but at the same time drastically different. The critic, Rosalind Miller, pushes the importance of individual interpretation. "When reading *Tender Buttons*, it is more important for the reader to allow the symbols to form familiar associations and meanings than to try to explicate the text according to what Miss Stein may have had in mind" (Miller 48). We don't even know for sure if Stein had anything specific in mind. Her point in writing these poems may have been for pure pleasure, either for herself or others, and if that is true then think of how much time would be wasted by readers who try to figure out exactly what Stein meant.

The type of writing that Stein did in *Tender Buttons* does not necessarily have to be considered good by all of its readers, but I don't think that you will find any reader who will say that it is not different. It is this difference that can bring the enjoyment or frustration of it. Language can get boring. If words become boring and people begin to say them without meaning, then language no longer is important. Donald Sutherland

puts an emphasis on the fact that a word has to be in a situation in order for it to contain meaning. "Any name, unless it is put into a situation which shocks it into meaning, gradually does not have any vividness or convey any actuality of experience, and much of the effort in *Tender Buttons* is to replace or shock the name of anything in order to restore the sense of immediate unprepared experience" (Sutherland 75). The individual reader brings a different background to the combination of words that Stein has set up. Words can have various effects on people. There comes a point when a person starts to analyze single words. He begins to break the word down into syllables and then sounds. When he tries to remember what the word means, he can't because now it means something new to him.

Poets and writers manipulate language everyday. These people want to provide entertainment and stimulate emotion. Language and words are their vehicles to do this. Gertrude Stein attempted to use language and words on her behalf. She used them to create experiences. The experiences she hoped to create can only be found in the minds and emotions of each individual reader. In an article about Gertrude Stein, F.W. Dupee comments on the reception of Miss Stein's work by poets. "Poets have found her work exciting, however inexplicably so, as if words in themselves might in certain circumstances appeal to some receptive apparatus in man that is comparable to what people call extrasensory perception" (Dupee 521). Gertrude Stein allows the words to form around the subconscious thoughts of readers. The concreteness of her words and text bring forth a part of each individual subconscious and then an overwhelming emotion is created. Not everyone is in the same or similar circumstances, but the poetry of Stein can be understood and interpreted across a broad spectrum.

Gertrude Stein writes for the individual. It is possible that every reader of *Tender Buttons* can walk away from it with her own interpretation and sense of oneness with the work. This individual attachment is what will continue to interest readers in the text and keep them coming back to it. Judy Grahn, a reader of Stein, provides us with tips for

reading Stein. "Essential Clues For Really Reading Her; 1.) Play with her...2.) When she gets tedious, skip around...3.) Read aloud with a friend or two...4.) Pick a sentence as a mantra or daily meditation...5.) Sing the lines" (Grahm 22-23). These tips show many of the ways in which reading Stein would be an individual process. If I asked five people what the passage from *Rooms* (mentioned earlier) means to them, I would get five different answers. The idea that a reader can find individuality in the work is true and whether Stein did this on purpose, it is still one of the most highly debated ideas among critics of *Tender Buttons*.

MILK

Climb up in sight climb in the whole utter needles and a guess a whole guess is hanging. Hanging hanging. (TB 30).

When Gertrude Stein looked at milk, what kind of milk was she looking at? Had she seen a cow being milked? Is that what udders she is talking about? What does hanging have to do with milk? If we assume that there is meaning in this poem, then we would also have to accept that there is not enough context or clues to know exactly what Stein was describing. Where the meaning could be then, is within Stein. "Anything you create you want to exist," Gertrude Stein said, "and its means of existence is in being printed" (qtd. in Haas 35). If Stein didn't think that something existed until it was printed, then maybe her feelings and emotions didn't exist until they were printed. *Tender Buttons* has been said to be a type of diary for Stein, in which she was writing for herself and about herself. The only reason that *Tender Buttons* became a public work is so that Stein could make her emotions real. Stein didn't publish *Tender buttons* for an audience, but rather for herself. There had to be an audience for the book to be succesful, but the audience wan't the most important consideration in her writing.

For all of the people who try their hardest to get to the place where Stein was when she was writing this work, both emotionally and physically, it is not possible. We do not live in the same time period, and we did not know Gertrude Stein. "If there is too great a difference between the acts of creator and the re-creator, no amount of weight and volume, of gravity or levity either - will sufficiently bring their acts together" (Hadas 59). Stein may not have wanted her experiences to be able to be re-created. She may have just wanted her experiences to be out there, to be real.

Human nature may actually be a giant part of *Tender Buttons* also. Gertrude Stein was struggling with two very important points of human nature: sexuality and family

ethics. She incorporated these two ideas into her poems. Writing the poems helped her to come to terms with her own human nature and also the natures of people around her. Pamela Hadas believes that Stein believed in a general nature. "Any subject-'Roastbeef', for instance-leads not to understanding of its own superficial nature, but to the author's general and firm perception of a general nature" (Hadas 63). A general nature is not something that I would say Stein believed in, unless of course, we accept Stein's idea of human nature as the general nature. I would agree that roastbeef would have a superficial nature for two reasons. The first reason it is superficial is because it is not communicable. Secondly, it was given even its name by humans and therefore it is not of itself. We are getting Gertrude Stein's perception, as an artist, as a woman, and as an individual, from *Tender Buttons*.

Stein said that you want anything you have created to exist. The problem for her was to find a place, a medium in which her emotions and ideas could exist. Allegra Stewart said, "In my opinion, Whitehead's definition of religion comes closest to Gertrude Stein's attitude toward writing. Whitehead says that 'religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness', and he related individual solitariness to universality, because 'universality is a disconnection from immediate surroundings. It is an endeavour to find something permanent and intelligible by which to interpret the confusion of immediate detail'" (Stewart 499). Stein is experiencing a moment, a solitary moment, in which she has become confused and she is searching for a way to justify her emotions and actions. Words and language are Stein's medium. She takes accepted things, words with a given definition, and then she places them in new positions of the language and opens up the mind. She convinces herself that a noun can occupy the place of a verb, and it is okay. Margueritte Murphy says that "she exchanges ordinary meaning for her own encoded one, and she herself so easily sees the difference, if we don't always" (Murphy 398). Her medium is exactly that-- it is hers and no one else's. She might have looked back on *Tender Buttons* and said that she wrote it to open everyone's mind to new ideas and

possibilities(Haas 15). At the time she was writing it though, I wonder if she didn't know that its purpose was to open herself and justify her emotions and ideas to herself.

Stream of consciousness writing is a major part of this work. The writing itself is not stream of consciousness, but rather it is worked over and over to the perfect dimension of form. The idea or object behind the writing is stream of consciousness in that Stein wrote about the present idea or object and did not reflect on its past or future. Randa Dubnick says that "The physical world is experienced as unique and immediate in each present moment as the consciousness receives data" (Dubnick 30). If Stein saw a button and it made her think of her car, then the present way in which she felt about each item would be combined and reported in a poem. The immediacy and necessity of each item would take precedence over what the items were. This idea of writing is not something that only Gertrude Stein can understand, however, this type of writing and what it signifies is only relevant, as far as meaning is concerned, to the author. "Much of the problem readers have with this grotesquely authentic work stems from its unusual use of what Stein called 'lists' or 'series'" (Rother 111). This use of listing or creating series also supports the idea of stream of consciousness writing. The use of conjunctions and verbs is not necessary in conveying meaning, so why would she put them in? By listing words and ignoring their prescribed positions in a sentence, Stein becomes her only true reader.

The question often arises whether *Tender Buttons* should be classified as poetry. It does not have a basic theme or moral, it is not written in any standard grammar, and it cannot carry the same or similar meaning for each reader. I do not think that poetry should be judged on any of these things. Poetry demonstrates emotion. It is meaningful to the poet. B.L. Reid, a critic of Stein, says about *Tender Buttons*, "The lines (what else can one call them?) of *Tender Buttons* are poetry to her" (Reid 141). Even though it seems harsh and demeaning, Stein would probably agree. The "lines" are poetry to her, and if they do not appear as poetry to other readers then those readers cannot or have not

experienced similar emotions or dealings with human nature that would place them in the same realities as Stein.

The idea of there being a center is expressed throughout *Tender Buttons*. The center would be the database, the information center from which we have the ability to draw information. Stein does not like this idea of one place from which all our ideas must stem. She would be a supporter of the infinity theory of the universe. If there is no end, then there is no center. Rosalind Miller says, "When she says at the start of the *Rooms* section of *Tender Buttons*, 'Act so that there is no use in a centre' (TB 63), she is in effect giving herself the authority to compose without direct reference, to free the activity of signifying from the necessity of representing the thing as if language were transparent, as if we could see behind its mask" (Miller 29). The center could also be the necessity. Gertrude Stein did not like qualifications and things to which she was compelled to adhere. She did not need to label and follow everything the way many others do. She needed to assert herself and create the self rather than being what other people said mattered. A reader, Jayne Walker, says that "in *Tender Buttons* the absence of a center is presented not as a loss but as a liberation that allows limitless invention of new, purely poetic orders" (Walker 149). Poetry, especially Stein's poetry, would not be considered poetry by critical, conventional standards because it does not follow their established standards. It is poetry of and for itself and its creator. A center is a community of common. No center is a community of selves.

Gertrude Stein said, "I was not interested in what people would think when they read this poetry; I was entirely taken up with my problem, and if it did not tell my story, it would tell some story" (qtd. in Haas 30). It sounds pretty clear who she wrote *Tender Buttons* for and about. I've always been told that a writer must consider his audience before he can begin writing. If the audience is yourself, then it would require much concentration to consider yourself as an audience and the author. Stein would really have had to examine herself and be honest about her emotions and intentions. I have also been

told, by teachers and peers, that there is only one meaning in a poem and that is what the author intends. This is true to a certain extent. The author intended a specific meaning or meanings and since she is the creator then I can see the point of there being only one meaning. However, readers are all different and each reader can bring from a work his own meaning. It may not be the meaning of the poem, but it is the meaning created by the poem for the specific reader. Stein wrote her story for herself, got it published to make it real, and then she realized that the stories that people got out of it for themselves would be more of a justification of the reality of her own emotions and conventions. The fact that people still read *Tender Buttons* today adds to the belief that Stein, her life, and her techniques are real and not a joke.

The idea of writing in the present is supported by the use of objects, food, and rooms as the subtopics of the book. These are all concrete and tangible things. Gertrude Stein could look at an orange on a summer day and picture Alice B. Toklas in the living room knitting. She would feel happy and warm. When writing about this she would title it orange, because that was the first tangible thing that she saw. Next she would list or identify pieces of her thoughts and other tangible items that entered into her mind about that time. Leo Stein said, "When I was young, I was perpetually using the phrase, 'Keep your eye on the object and let your ideas play about it'" (qtd. in Hadas 59). This is almost the same thing as saying let your imagination run wild. Leo was a great influence on his sister and it might have been from influence such as this quote that led her to write the way she did, which ironically, is part of the reason for the animosity that grew between the brother and sister. Anyway, Stein focused on an object and let her mind wander to anywhere it wished to go. She even describes writing *Tender Buttons*, in her own words, in this way. "I used to take objects on a table, like a tumbler or any kind of object and try to get the picture of it clear and separate in my mind and create a word relationship between the word and the things seen" (Haas 25). She did let her mind wander about an object, but at the same time she tried to isolate it. The most important thing to realize is

that she had all of this happening in her own mind and with her connections that are inexplicable to the readers.

Gertrude Stein has said that she wrote *Tender Buttons* to tell a story about her problem, which we as the readers don't know, and that she wrote it for herself and in her own mind (Haas 15). One of the reasons why it may be so difficult to read and to find meaning within it is because it is not public domain. It is the domain and the human nature of one woman. Pamela Hadas says that "*Tender Buttons* is written in a very private idiolect" (Hadas 72). This is very true. It is a private language with unique choices of words, based on a problem, and composed through human nature. Gertrude Stein, herself, cannot get back to the point she was at when she wrote one of the poems in *Tender Buttons* because they were moments. Moments cannot be re-created completely, not even by the person who had that moment.

Was Gertrude Stein Writing In a Purely Feminist Or Homosexual Language?

(Excerpt from) *Rooms*

Almost very likely there is no seduction, almost very likely there is no stream, certainly very likely the height is penetrated, certainly certainly the target is cleaned. Come to sit, come to refuse, come to surround, come slowly and age is not lessening.

This passage, if a reader looks at it from that perspective, can very easily be portrayed as a feminist and/or sexual passage. Most critics would say that language as most people use it is not the language of *Tender Buttons*. If we can all agree on that, then certainly we could all agree that there is the emergence of new forms. The question is what do we call those new forms, and to the great horror of Gertrude Stein, how do we categorize them? One critic, Linda Mizejewski, "Without ascribing to it a theme or narrative, we can at least see in it a consciousness that is deliberately breaking down categories of perception, time, space, and language" (Mizejewski 38). If Stein is breaking down these categories, then why do critics spend so much time trying to create categories for her to fit in? Once again, it is probably human nature. We are not comfortable with something that cannot be put into some type of category. It is not natural for us. Beyond the fact that Gertrude was trying to break through categories she was also trying to write about a lesbian relationship and ideas that men had not written about. An editor, Margaret Dickie, says that Stein "had to find a way of saying both what had not been said before and what could not be said" (Dickie 5). In essence, she had to fight two prejudices at the same time; the prejudice against women and the prejudice against homosexuals.

Many of the critics base the idea that Stein was creating a new feminine language in the fact that her topics are domestic and that she is writing in some code that only women will understand. "Between noise and articulation there is only a custom of the tongue" (Hadas 60). It is this custom which tells a reader how to get from one thing to the other

that Stein might have been trying to change, not necessarily the noise or the articulation, simply how to get from one to the other. She wanted to form a new way, for women especially, to get from where they were to where they should be as far as language and literature are concerned.

It is important to remember that it was at about this time when women first started getting many rights and privileges in the world, and they were fighting hard against prejudices. There were many women writers at the time who wrote about or around feminism and tried to persuade their readers. Linda Mizejewski says that "a Whiteheadian perspective clarifies the dilemma of self identification that occurs in the works of several feminist modernists: Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Katherine Mansfield, and Kate Chopin" (Mizejewski 34). She doesn't include Gertrude Stein in this list of feminist modernists because Stein wasn't an out and out feminist. What Stein did was simply assume a "male" role, as far as society was concerned. She was so confident in her role and good at what she did, people befriended and supported her in it.

Based on the idea that Stein is not a feminist but still a supporter of equality, it would be correct to say that she would want to eliminate conventions of both sexes, not just the female sex. Stein tried to write in her own new language. It was the language of a woman who refused to be titled a woman by the societal standards of the time.

Marguerite Murphy says that "Stein's strategy, of course, is subversive: to subvert conventional feminine prose and talk, while intimating her own new language and ways of seeing" (Murphy 285). Ways of thinking could be related to the emphasis on self identity over wholistic identity. Whether or not Stein's was a female or a male voice, a Jew or a Catholic, a writer or a painter, she was not part of a category. I could not say Gertrude Stein was a.... and fill in the blank with one thing. Gertrude Stein was Gertrude Stein, and she did many different things, and she was many different people. This was

probably her most important aspect in life and in writing. In her key phrase, "A rose is a rose is a rose," we can see this idea come across.

Stein brought to her writing her personal background. She had gone to college and studied medicine. Her best friend was her brother. She was semi-wealthy, and she had grown up reading. This is not your typical young woman's background in 1913. Even though she had these different background experiences, she still realized the masculinity and patriarchy involved in everything. Elyse Blankley said that "In her earliest fictions, Stein would work to efface from her imagination the college girl who dines on a direct diet of western (patriarchal) culture's words. The real revolution of the word would begin with Stein herself" (Hoffman 196). Stein would have to remove the word from any context with which it was already associated, and then she would have to create a new context for it to be in, but at the same time, she did not want it to suddenly jump from a patriarchal context to a matriarchal context.

It is interesting that she chose to title her poems with headings that are generally domestic and feminine. Some critics acknowledge the societal norms in our history, before attempting to analyze Stein. "Historically and culturally defined as *the* female domain, the house and its objects are often evoked negatively..." (Neuman 123). Stein took these objects and created new associations for them. These new associations do not make the reader view them as feminine or masculine words but rather words that are carriers to new ideas. One critic, Jayne Walker, says that "*Tender Buttons* describes a female world (circa 1912) of domestic objects and ritual-a world of dresses and hats, tables and curtains, mealtimes and bedtimes, cleanliness and dirt" (Walker 127). I would have to say that Stein used these words but not the meanings or associations the words had. Also, I don't think that Stein wanted to describe a female world. By describing a female world, especially with these words, she would be defeating her own purpose of not having a distinction of gender.

Even though I do think that Stein is trying to eliminate stereotypes and categories, she does use some word connections and sounds that lead me to believe that she is angry about stereotypes and categories. Lisa Ruddick gives a good example of what I mean in her example of stains. "In *Tender Buttons* and the companion texts, many of the objects upon which Stein confers a new distinction are bodily stains, tokens of stigmatized femininity" (Hoffman 228). When the genders are separated then they are given distinctions which allow them to be considered different. "Bodily stains" are feminine markings that cannot be overlooked. They are different than men's markings, but they do not have to be considered bad. This seemed to be one of Stein's goals. If there are differences, why do we make one good and one bad?

If readers insist on identifying Gertrude Stein with the feminists then it is important to recognize that femininity would not have been her main goal. Catharine Stimpson agrees that "even though Stein focuses intensely on domestic things and environments, she does not ground her text in the feminine" (Miller 14). If we do separate genders then she does use feminine images but the words she uses to communicate ideas with those images are masculine. They are strong and powerful words where feminine words would typically be weak and mushy. Beyond the gender question is the question of sexuality.

Gertrude Stein was a lesbian during a time period when homosexuals could be homosexual but it was not acceptable by society to tell anyone or act homosexual in public. In this sense, "*Tender Buttons* is probably Gertrude Stein's most 'private' performance" (Dupee 522). There is a large following of critics and readers who agree that this work is a personal journal of the emotions and actions of Stein as a lesbian and more intimately with her new relationship with Alice Toklas. These people believe that every word of *Tender Buttons* can be translated into something sexually, emotionally, or socially associated with lesbianism and homosexuality. Marguerite Murphy says that "indeed, much of the prose comes to encode lesbian intimacies..." (Murphy 391). Some of the prose she is referring to is the use of words like "come", "milk", "seduce,"

"erection," "nipples," and "lover." These words can be taken literally and translated into the context they would be used in when speaking of intimate relations. This theory of a lesbian language is easily supported because similar words and ideas are portrayed in her other works. The fact that a lesbian theme can be found throughout her works would indicate that lesbianism was a major aspect of not just Stein's life but also her thought process.

If there is any action involved in *Tender Buttons*, or if there is any plot, it would have to be the seduction and sexual acts of two women, namely Toklas and Stein. The descriptions involved in the text can be manipulated into graphic representations of such encounters. Some early critics even went so far as to call this pornography. "The physical world portrayed in *Tender Buttons* includes the most intimate realities of the female body" (Walker 139). Some of these intimacies would be the cleanliness of the vagina, the stains of urine and blood, the nipples, the motherly milk, and the description of nakedness. If this is the aspect from which one chooses to look at *Tender Buttons*, then I would say that these images are definitely there.

There are some critics who do not think that lesbianism plays a part because they don't see it as the dominant role of the text. If lesbianism was not the dominant theme in a text, it would take on less importance and that wouldn't be something that Stein would want to do to lesbianism. Margaret Dickie says that "if *Tender Buttons* is a celebration of lesbian desire, it is a celebration that is always being undercut" (Dickie 13). I don't know what she would think it was always being undercut by, but if a reader is looking at the text primarily from one of the other perspectives and then comes across a poem that seems to convey lesbianism in form and content, it would seem that such content would be an afterthought and not as important as the first meaning that the reader was finding. If one reads the text with the thought of it being a lesbian text with lesbian themes then in some ways it can be considered a novel. It would have a plot and a series of events.

Readers come to a text with certain background experiences and attitudes. These experiences and attitudes are things which we might normally hold in our subconscious but when Stein brings her ideas to our attention, through her unconventional word and grammar choices, we realize our own feelings and ideas about a topic. Sexuality has always been a taboo subject in literature, especially if one's sexual preference is not considered 'normal' by society. In looking at this text from the perspective of a homosexual language it is necessary to see what Stein implies about the male as well as the female. Lisa Ruddick says that "in *Tender Buttons* she paraphrases conventional attitudes about men's and women's bodies..." (Hoffman 229). This could very well be an attempt, like the attempt against feminine or masculine, to eliminate sexual preferences and attitudes about these preferences. Why does one preference have to be better than the other? In this respect, Stein's values as a feminist are not to make women more prevalent, or to destroy men, but rather to create a genderless realm in which sexuality is sexuality and it shouldn't be different for men and women.

The idea that *Tender Buttons* is a feminine or homosexual text is supported by many of the words that Stein chose and also the format in which it was written. Some critics have gone as far as to claim that the title is about sexuality. Cynthia Secor said that "tender buttons are the nipples that give nourishment and pleasure" (Fleischmann 304). If Stein set out to accomplish something with this text, whether it be for herself or others then maybe it was in the sexual realm and she wanted to give her readers both nourishment and pleasure.

(6)
Why Read *Tender Buttons*?

SALAD
It is a winning cake(TB 37).

I have discussed five categories in which critics and readers have placed *Tender Buttons*. I have found valid arguments for and against all these categories. The only way I can support one over another is to give you my personal reading of *Tender Buttons*. The first time I read it, I spent a lot of time looking for the hidden meanings in everything. When I was done, I had pages and pages of alternate words and definitions for each poem.

Example:

A PETTICOAT

A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm (TB 13).

Definitions	Alternate Words
A= first letter of alphabet; indefinite article, one, any.	A= none
light = an agent of illumination; having little weight.	light=airy, carefree, insubstantial
white = the color of snow, pure, bright	white= spotless, chaste, unblemished, immaculate
disgrace = loss of trust, favor, honor	disgrace= shame, scandal
an= indefinite article	an=none
ink = a colored liquid; protective secretion of an octopus	ink= black, murky
spot = small area differing in color; small quantity or amount; a locality; a difficult or embarrassing situation	spot= mark, blemish, stain, taint, site
rosy= of the color of roses; having pink; healthy cheeks, optimistic, hopeful.	rosy= auspicious, blooming
charm= alluring quality; magic verse or formula; object bringing luck.	charm= magic, spell, attraction fascination
petticoat= underskirt, slip; slang for a woman	petticoat= none available

Based on lists like this example, I would conclude that I found the hidden message.

The first time I looked at this list, I concluded that she was talking about a carefree, pure

woman who had lost trust in someone or something because they had used some protective agent against her and ruined the relationship, but that the woman fell into the persons alluring quality and became hopeful of a reconciliation.

I look at this hidden meaning now and I think, how did I read so far into that? That is just insane to spend that much time on one poem out of a book and then do the same thing for all the poems in the book. That is exactly what I did though. What is even worse is that after I had gone through and found definitions and other words for the poems and analyzed the hidden meanings in all of them, I went back and read my conclusions and decided that there were other hidden meanings that I could decipher. Another meaning I came up with for *A PETTICOAT* was that it was from a man's point of view and he was saying that a woman pretends to be pure but she is marked with the disgrace of menstruation, which is not only a blemish, but a magic hope for new life.

I don't know about any one else, but for me, that kind of minute analyzation of every word and detail, over and over again is frustrating and even infuriating. I couldn't find the hidden message. I could find many hidden messages, but they were all mine. I had no way of knowing what Gertrude Stein meant when she wrote them. I stopped analyzing the poems for awhile and I read three books about Gertrude Stein.

The three books I read, one by Stein herself and two by other people, were about her lifestyle and her friends. I read about Stein's relationship with Alice B. Toklas, her brother Leo, many painters(including Picasso), philosophers, friends like Mabel Dodge and Carl Van Vechten, WWI soldiers, and even younger writers, like Hemingway. While I read these books, I was captivated by her, her life, and her lifestyle. There are so many things about her that I commend, honor, and even envy. She read many books growing up with her good friend and brother, Leo. She went to college in the 1900's, and studied medicine. She had an affair with a woman friend, had her heart broken, and moved to Paris, where she stayed for the majority of her life. She was fascinated by paintings and collected works of art by young painters and impressionists who are now extremely

famous. She was friends with interesting people like Matisse, Picasso, and Hemingway. She met Alice B. Toklas. Toklas moved in and they had a lifelong, loving relationship, which they were open about with friends and company. She was a writer first and anything else second. She traveled all over Europe and drove an ambulance during the war. She loved her dogs, singing, and food. She stood by her word and her beliefs. When she got in an argument with a friend, like Picasso, they would stop talking for years. I got the impression that she was strong-willed, got her way a lot, and didn't care too much about what other people thought of her as long as she thought well of herself. The thing that I'm most envious of was her weekly salons in which people came from all over the world to visit, meet her and other people, and just be intellectuals and have a good time.

After I read all about Stein and the things I have mentioned, I realized that she was a fascinating person, as well as a writer, and that she probably didn't hide a secret message in her poems. I stopped analyzing the poems and I started reading the book again. This time around, I found a lot of words and images that could have been references to events in Stein's life. I also found poems that seemed very erotic, others that seemed frivolous, and others that had the distinct influence of Alice B. Toklas.

EXAMPLES:

Erotic:

ROASTBEEF(an excerpt)

In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling. In feeling anything is resting, in feeling, anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recognition, in feeling there is recurrence, and entirely mistaken there is pinching(TB 21).

Frivolous:

SALAD DRESSING AND AN ARTICHOKE

Please pale hot, please cover rose, please acre in the red stranger,

please butter all the beefsteak with regular feel faces.

Influenced: A TIME TO EAT.

*A pleasant simple habitual and tyrannical and authorised and
educated and resumed and articulate separation. This is not tardy.*

It was during the third reading of *Tender Buttons* that I saw these three excerpts and others as related to Stein and her ideas. When I read ROASTBEEF I can picture Gertrude Stein seducing Alice B. Toklas. When I read SALAD DRESSING AND AN ARTICHOKE I laugh at the rhyming similarity to the rhyme *Pease Porridge Hot....* and also the pure absurdity in the combination of beefsteak, artichokes, and roses. When I read A TIME TO EAT I can picture Alice Toklas slaving over a perfect meal all day for Gertrude Stein and Stein being late and the dish being cold, which was one of Toklas' pet peeves.

After doing research into the categories that other critics and readers have placed Stein's *Tender Buttons* I tried to place myself into one of the categories. In small ways, and throughout different readings of *Tender Buttons*, I realized that I fit into all the categories. However, I believe that I fit into one category more fully than the others and that is that each reader should find their own meaning. Gertrude Stein said that there was no sense in *Tender Buttons*. Stein wanted to shake up the language. She wanted to show readers how versatile and fun language and words can be. I believe that what she meant when she said there was no sense in this text is that she didn't spell things out for her readers, she didn't create any sense, but sense could be made out of it by the reader and also that she could make sense out of it for herself.

Carl Van Vechten, Stein's friend, said "It is worthy to note that almost everyone tries to make sense out of Miss Stein just as everyone insists on making photographs out of drawings by Picabia, when the essential of his art is that he is getting away from the

photographic" (Hoffman 37). Gertrude Stein didn't exactly live the most normal life. She was eccentric and successful. She pulled away from the normal. Things that made sense to the world as a whole, didn't to her. She begins the section of *Tender Buttons* entitled ROOMS by saying "Act so that there is no use in a centre" (TB 43). For me, this is the reason to read *Tender Buttons*. She doesn't say "Act so that there is no centre", she says "Act so that there is no *use* in a centre". The idea of a center, a norm, a rule, or something that people or ideas revolve around can be present and some people may need to make use of this centre. I believe that Stein wanted us to be able to function, live, love, and exist without using the centre.

This last time I read *Tender Buttons*, I moved away from the idea that it was a book of poems and I focused on the idea that it was a collection of events, emotions, words, objects, and sense that Gertrude Stein wrote down in an unconventional manner. I read through the book in about two hours and I laughed, was moved, imagined, and felt emotions from the words that Stein put on paper. Not only was it the words themselves, but also the sound they created and the background of the writer that all combined to give me a wonderful reading experience. It left me feeling content and creative and inspired. People should continue to read *Tender Buttons* to inspire themselves. It is a text that makes a reader feel good if one reads it and stops analyzing it.

Any work should be an inspiration. *Tender Buttons* was a double inspiration for me because I was not only inspired by the text but also by the writer herself. On the following page I have included some of my own imitations of this text. After reading it this last time, I decided to write in the same format as Gertrude Stein and include at least one little collection at the end of some of my own daily journal entries. I hope that people will continue to read, understand, and enjoy this text as much as I have learned to do.

A SENTENCE

A known daffodil. Spend time with tense no even no more sense.

A CAT

Ears without nails in the red dream of always water running

where is where from which it is.

DREAMS AND WORDS

Tired and when does this not become deer or even a breath

a deer breath on wet greens with without a sleep.

GERTRUDE STEIN

Normal is when what is there but nothing and when nothing is more then
an expression, a touch is forever, a mind is between, please come to watch, come
to a dock, drive with me, please but never is never without creativity.

A PICTURE

A wine is sweet with kisses where lives the truth oh truth that is bread. A moment of
linger is dropped with cheese and tears where never is always from nowhere.

WORKS CITED

- Dickie, Margaret, and Thomas Travisano, eds. Gendered Modernisms. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996. 3-21.
- Dickie, Margaret. Stein, Bishop, and Rich. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. 18-40.
- Dubnick, Randa. The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984.
- Dupee, F.W. "Gertrude Stein." Commentary XXXIII. 1962. 519-23.
- Fleischmann, Fritz, ed. American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism. Boston: G.K. Hall and Company, 1982.
- Grahn, Judy. Really Reading Gertrude Stein. 1989. 2-39.
- Haas, Robert Bartlett, ed. A Primer For The Gradual Understanding of Gertrude Stein. Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1971. 11-36.
- Hadas, Pamela. "Spreading the Difference: One Way to Read Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*." Twentieth Century Literature 24 (1978): 57-75.
- Hoffman, Michael J. Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein. Boston: G.K. Hall and Company, 1986. 27-59.
- Miller, Nancy K. The Poetics of Gender. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Miller, Rosalind. Gertrude Stein: Form and Intelligibility. New York: The Exposition Press, 1949.
- Mizejewski, Linda. "Gertrude Stein: The Pattern Moves, The Woman Behind Shakes It." Women's Studies 13 (1986): 33-47.
- Murphy, Margueritte. "Familiar Strangers: The Household Words of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*." Contemporary Literature 32 (1991): 383-402.
- Neuman, Shirley, and Ira B. Nadel, eds. Gertrude Stein and The Making of Literature. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988.

Reid, B.L. Art By Subtraction. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958.

110-185.

Rieke, Alison. The Senses of Nonsense. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992.

Rother, James. "Gertrude Stein and the Translation of Experience." Essays In

Literature 3 (1976): 105-118.

Russell, Francis. Three Studies in Twentieth Century Obscurity. Aldington: Hand and Flower Press, 1954. 66-122.

Stein, Gertrude. Tender Buttons. New York: Dover Publications, 1914.

Stewart, Allegra. "The Quality of Gertrude Stein's Creativity." American Literature XXVIII (1957): 488-506.

Sutherland, Donald. Gertrude Stein: A Biography of Her Work. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951. 71-175.

Walker, Jayne L. The Making of a Modernist: Gertrude Stein from Three Lives to Tender Buttons. Amherst: The University of Massachusettes Press, 1984.

Weinstein, Norman. Gertrude Stein and the Literature of Modern Consciousness. New York: Frederick Unger Publishing Co., 1970. 47-68.

White, Ray. "The Chicago Renaissance Discovers Gertrude Stein." American Notes and Queries 20 (1982): 111-13.

Yalden-Thomson, D.C. "Obscurity, Exhibitionism, and Gertrude Stein." Virginia Quarterly Review 34 (1958): 133-37.